

Who cares about congress centres?



By Barbara Maple

with the meetings business, and whether it's prepared to turn that understanding into support.

In fact, community support is critical for at least three good reasons. First, success in this business demands ongoing investment in facilities and marketing, usually by government – and this in turn requires that political leaders see there is support for this investment coming from the community.

Second, the community is part of the product; planners these days are looking for a “total experience” for their delegates, and this includes the atmosphere they enjoy when they're spending free time in the location. Third, there is a need to remember that events can and do have local impacts – everything from traffic congestion to street closures for special events – and when this happens, organisers will need a community who understand the greater benefits that are being generated, rather than just focusing on any disruptions!

But while everyone agrees that community support is important, few actually invest a lot of time or money in developing it. The fact is, this is just one more demand to be addressed in the already busy lives of congress centre staff, and often it is the one that falls off the priority list.

The problem with good

community relations is that by the time you realise you need them, it's usually already too late. Goodwill needs to be built up ahead of time, like a “rainy day” fund, so that it's there when problems emerge. The time to begin is long before you have an issue, when people in the community are more receptive to the messages you want to deliver.

Most congress centre managers know what the most compelling messages are: things like money, jobs, professional development opportunities and an enhanced profile for the destination. The question is, how are they best delivered? There are several ways to approach this question.

First, there is a need to have good, solid data to support any claims that may be made for such things as economic benefits, jobs or tax revenues. Too many interest groups these days throw around big economic numbers and people are less willing to accept these without the appropriate backup information. To maintain credibility, centres and their owners must be able to document their claims and, preferably, have these verified by independent authorities.

Second, centres need to find ways to share the experience with people in the community, many of whom would never otherwise attend a convention or understand what they're

all about. By definition, most delegates are from outside of the community, so unless centres make a conscious effort to enable locals to share in what goes on in their facilities, there will be little community awareness. Something as simple as an open house or a special annual event for the community can go a long way in this regard.

Finally, managers delivering a meetings industry message need to remember that people tend to filter information based on their own immediate priorities and concerns. They must make a real effort to translate the convention message into things that are meaningful to the community. There is no denying that community relations can be a lot of work. But unless managers invest in building community support, the time will inevitably come when they need that support and it's simply not there. **e**



Barbara Maple is the President of the International Association of Congress Centres (AIPC); President of the Vancouver Convention & Exhibition Centre President of the Joint Meetings Industry Council (JMIC) and Chairman of the World Council for Venue Management (WCVI) secretariat@aipc.org www.aipc.org